

Transcript of David Normington's blog comments
(September 2006 – May 2007)

Blog for 11 Sep 2006

The blog is back

There have been some comments on the blog that I have been silent for several weeks. That's because I have been on holiday. I eventually got away - a few days late due to the alleged terrorist plot. But, when I did get away - with no lap top or blackberry - I had a very good and much needed break. I hope others have too.

The task for the autumn is convert the reform plans into reality and, thereby, raise the standard and quality of what we do. The blog continues to be a source of ideas a good barometer for what is on people's minds. Please keep the comments coming.

David Normington

Blog for 9 Oct 2006

OurSpace

I haven't said much for a couple of weeks. So here are quite a lot of thoughts. First, did you read the update last week on Home Office reform? Did you see how we have tried to describe our ambition for reform? What did you think?

Second, I promise I have heard the many messages about the inadequacies of our systems for pay, IT, etc. I am very fed up that we are not making more progress (in fact on internal IT we seem to be going backwards.) But we are renewing our efforts.

Third, someone asked about my involvement in dealing with the alleged terrorist plot in August. Well, it is probably the most serious thing I have dealt with in 33 years in the Civil Service. I learned how much we depend on the police and the Security Service - they were superb.

Fourthly, the Sunday Telegraph asked, under freedom of information, if I would publish the blog. But surely this is our internal space for a frank conversation? I can't see what it's got to do with the national press, can you?

David Normington

Blog for 24 Oct 2006

In with the IT crowd

Thanks for all the comments about the need to improve IT. I will shortly be sitting down with those responsible for our IT systems within the Home Office to talk to them about how far we have got and what needs to be improved. I will ensure that they see all the comments that have been made.

If you'd like to talk to me face to face, there's a chance to do so at the lunch time and coffee events which I will be continuing to hold over the next few weeks. I calculated that I have talked to about 800 staff in small and large groups since the reform plans were published in July and I am keen to get over the 1000 mark by Christmas.

But if you can't attend one of these events, please keep the comments coming on how we can improve the Home Office.

David Normington

Blog for 10 Nov 2006

IT improvements start here

I promised I would put all the comments about IT on my blog to [Tom Saunders, the new Director of Home Office IT Shared Services](#). I did this last week and discussed with Tom how the IT service can be improved. He assures me that the IT team recognise there are a number of areas in which they must improve the IT services that we receive. Tom has agreed a programme of improvements with his management team, the first of which is the publication of committed service levels for the most frequently requested services. I understand that the top three service requests are:

- a new standard desktop pc;
- a new account; or
- access to a shared folder.

Home Office IT Shared Services is working to finalise the details, with the intention of reducing delivery time to 5 working days from request to completion. Tom expects to be able to confirm the start date for the new service levels during November. I have asked him to meet me again in a month's time to provide me with an update on the improved service levels and on the other initiatives that Home Office IT Shared Services will be delivering to improve our IT service. He promises that they will look at all the comments they receive on my blog and elsewhere and while not everything will improve immediately, there is a real commitment steadily to improve the service. Look out for a HOT story for further details.

David Normington

Tackling your HR woes

I continue to receive a worrying number of comments on my blog concerning a wide range of HR related matters.

I have discussed the underlying themes and issues with Dusty Amroliwala, the new Director of HR Services, and have explored a number of initiatives that he and his team hope to introduce in the very near future. These are being designed to address many of the fundamental concerns that you express, especially pay being inaccurate or not being provided in a timely manner.

Chief amongst the improvements that Dusty and his people are planning will be a new arrivals process (initially to be trialled for all new colleagues arriving at Marsham Street). Its aim is simple – to greet all new arrivals on their first day in the Home Office and to provide them with the necessary dedicated HR support that they require in their early days and weeks. Crucially, this will include capturing (on their very first day) the personal data required to ensure that their pay and other key HR functions are processed on a 'right first time' basis.

To complement these practical improvements, additional (improved) guidance and training is being provided for all staff involved in the whole pay process. This includes the HOPPS/HR Pay staff as well as Business Support Managers and Business Absence Managers, all of whom play a crucial role in ensuring the end to end pay process is carried out in a timely and effective manner.

Elsewhere, we have introduced a new system for conducting basic (BCE) security clearances which has already resulting in us coming within the 10 working day target in 92% of cases; prompting the DSU team to contemplate introducing an even tauter target of 4 or 5 working days. Wider improvements are also being finalised to improve the process of other levels of security clearances and to improve the handling of a number of sometimes more sensitive issues, including grievance procedures and the handling of long-term cases of absence.

Your comments about the need for a more customer orientated approach to aspects of HR delivery are also being addressed, primarily through a programme of more focussed and bespoke training.

I need absolutely no convincing of the importance of getting these fundamental HR components right – and 'right first time' is exactly what we must be aiming to achieve. I will remain closely engaged with this subject and with the improved levels of service that Dusty and his team are seeking to introduce.

I know that he would appreciate your direct feedback on all matters HR and that he, like I, will continue to read with care the comments that you record on my blog. Whilst every single one of our aspirations may not be achievable overnight, there is an absolute determination to improve the service of HR delivery – and to do it quickly as possible.

David Normington

Blog for 14 Dec 2006

Preparation, preparation, preparation . . .

I'm sorry I haven't written on my blog for a while. I've been preparing for the Home Affairs Select Committee.

You have no idea how much preparation goes into that, but it's not just by me, because a lot of people in the Department have been involved in the briefing and preparations. Hours spent learning lots of facts about the Home Office and going over with the Home Secretary what might be asked. But the occasion went well and being well prepared gives you confidence.

I tried at the Select Committee to ensure there were some positive messages about our achievements and to counteract the negative messages there have been recently about our performance targets and accounts. Despite what you may have read, we have met, or are on target to meet, 32 of our 40 performance targets, and only 3 will definitely not be met. And our accounts were signed off by the National Audit Office with only 2 qualifications, compared to the disclaimer last year. The Comptroller and Auditor General said that the accounts marked a "significant step forward for the Home Office."

We don't get much coverage for these positive stories so we need to keep getting these messages across. My New Year's resolution is to tell more about these good stories that we are achieving.

David Normington

Blog for 19 Dec 2006

The way we were in 2006

I just wanted to say Happy Christmas to all my regular bloggers. I have appreciated all the comments and reactions. I do try to read all the comments and act on them, if they require it.

Looking back over the year the lowest of low spots was the foreign national prisoners' crisis and its aftermath, when it seemed that the Home Office could do nothing right. In the middle of it I was hit by a horrible 'flu type virus, which laid me low just when I needed to be at my best. But we survived, didn't we? And, I believe, we have begun to come out of it.

On the positive side, I remember, with some pride, chairing COBR at 3:00am on the night of 10/11 August. I remember some staff events which have lifted my spirits (like IND's customer service event at the Fairfield Hall and the Centre for Learning and Development's fantastic celebration of 150 Home Office staff gaining qualifications.) I remember, on a visit to Preston, some people telling me how estates have been taken back from the grip of anti-

social behaviour. I remember visits to the Prison Service, to the Probation Service, to IPS, to the various parts of IND in Croydon, Sheffield, Liverpool and Heathrow and to lots of teams in 2MS, when I have just felt so proud and grateful that we have committed staff, working hard to deliver the best public service we can.

There is so much to do to put the Home Office fully on its feet. But I know we do so many good things. Please keep blogging with the positives as well as the negatives.

David Normington

Blog for 23 Jan 2007

No resile for the busy

I'm really sorry that I haven't said anything on the blog this New Year. But one event has followed another since I got back and I haven't had a moment to take breath. I know, however, that that is no excuse and I will try to do better.

It feels as though we have gone back to square one in the last couple of weeks. We clearly have made some mistakes around notification of criminal convictions abroad and we have taken some serious media criticism for it. But of course the frustrating thing is that this is an historic problem that we are putting right, so it doesn't tell us anything about the state of the Home Office today. I have been getting a fair bit of adverse comment about the decision to suspend a colleague pending a misconduct investigation. It is very difficult to explain that decision without compromising the inquiry and treating the individual unfairly.

But two things are important to me. I will always defend people who do their best in whatever job they are doing, even when they make mistakes. I will, however, expect people who are in some way negligent or do not take responsibility for their actions to face the consequences. That is the only way we can run the organisation.

I should, before finishing this, just comment on the particular point made by the member of staff from CICA. I'm afraid the plain fact is that it is Government policy to move work out of London. That is what we are doing with some parts of IND and some parts of the Prison Service, and a number of other functions. So CICA is not being uniquely singled out. I know that this is uncomfortable for the people directly involved. There continue to be a lot of jobs in the Home Office in and around London, and people who are positive, determined and skilled should have no trouble finding redeployment.

As for my New Year message, I don't really resile from any part of it, it was obviously written before the present difficulties and its sentiments are genuine.

I said in my most recent global that I thought the best reaction to present events was to continue to do an excellent job the best way we can. That is the best way to answer our critics.

David Normington

PS. Tom Saunders, Head of IT, will be acting as guest blog writer next time. Look out for Tom's entry next week.

Blog for 19 Feb 2007

Feedback on your feedback

Let me try to deal with some of the comments on the blog in recent times.

Communications: I think we are getting better overall. But our weakness remains our face to face briefings. Some managers do it; some don't. Team briefing is patchy. So this has to be the priority for 2007 at all levels.

Machinery of Government: I regret that I was not able to brief people in the Home Office before the Home Secretary's views about the possibility of splitting the Home Office hit the headlines. That's politics, and sometimes we just have to accept that this is the real world we live in. I did put out a global as soon as I could on the Monday afterwards. And I have done some exclusive briefing of senior colleagues since with the express aim of equipping them to answer your questions. But if face to face briefing is weak in your area, it may not be getting through.

Shared Services: I know some people in Liverpool are angry about the decision in principle to site our shared services centre in Newport, South Wales, alongside the Prison Service's Phoenix Centre. We did genuinely believe until late 2006 that we would find a solution in the north west. But cost and logistics required us to review the options. Newport opened up as a possibility because it has more space than we had originally believed. Three things influenced me in the decision. One was that Newport looks the most cost effective option. Another was the advantage of building up a centre of shared service expertise in Newport from the point of view of service quality and career opportunities for staff. The final one was that I know IND has been expanding in Liverpool, so there will remain a buoyant Home Office labour market in the north west with a range of jobs available.

Corporals and Sergeants: I know no offence was meant, so none should be taken. For those who were at the event, the Home Secretary was frank, open and very willing to engage with Grade 6 and 7 questions, including concerns about the "not fit for purpose" remarks and possible machinery of government changes.

Improving or not? I have noted Mervyn's comments. Surely the fact that we have Tom Saunders being willing to set clear standards and to debate internal IT's performance on the blog is a breakthrough in itself. As for the other improvements, what about 550 Home Office staff on management development programmes? The best performance on Ministerial correspondence ever? Improving service standards in HR and HOPPS? The 2005/06 accounts, "a significant step forward for the Home Office" (the Comptroller and Auditor General)? And see below . . .

And, finally a plug for [the video diary of my visit to Sheffield](#): a new building for IND staff in construction; more effort is being put into enforcement and compliance; a model programme to roll out the points-based system; the best examples I have seen so far in the Home Office of using "lean" techniques to improve processes. Improvement and change everywhere – it makes me proud to lead the Home Office.

David Normington

Blog for 27 Feb 2007

Say what you're saying

Thanks for all the comments on my long intervention last week. I can't reply to every point. That's not the purpose of the blog. But it does give me a good idea of what's on people's minds. And my reply last week tried to respond to all the hot issues.

On Liverpool/Newport I don't pretend this a great story. But we did believe we would site the Shared Services Centre in the north west and were actively looking at possible sites until late 2006. I still believe we will be able to offer good careers in the Home Office in Merseyside in the future for those who want them.

To anon (why anon, there's no need to be), I don't feel defensive or angry about comments on the blog. I am happy for people to say what they think (politely, of course). But so will I, and always try to be quite frank and honest. The good thing about the blog in recent weeks is that it seems to be a discussion of key current issues.

David Normington

Blog for 9 Mar 2007

Getting to the heart of HR matters

One of the most noticeable things about my blog recently is that almost all comments have been about HR issues. In a way, that's inevitable, because in an organisation as large as ours there will always be people who have an issue with their pay or terms and conditions.

The question it raises with me however is whether things are getting better or worse with HR, or whether people now feel they can use the blog to get their voice heard on HR issues? In an ideal world we need to get to a position where if staff have an HR issue, they feel they can get it dealt with quickly by HR Contact Centres.

I don't think we can eliminate all HR problems but I want to get to the position

where if people have an HR problem, they feel it can be dealt with efficiently.

David Normington

Blog for 13 Mar 2007

Neat and tidy

Thanks for all the comments on HR. I have my quarterly performance review with the HR Directorate this week and next week the first of a new monthly operational review with IND (soon to be BIA). I will ensure that these points are fed into those reviews.

I had a good morning at the new asylum office in Fleet Street on Friday. It is a really good example of reform in action – a new end to end system of case management, new and very motivated staff, an 11 week training programme for new entrants with more to come. I was very impressed. I must say I also quite liked the fact that the office was tidy and the staff looked very business like (even if they had been told to smarten up!) That is how the new agency needs to be.

Finally, to Maggie, thank you for mentioning the Radio 4 programme on the Civil Service, to which I and a number of Permanent Secretaries and Ministers (present and former) contributed. I did an hours interview from which they have taken so far 30 seconds. Let's see what happens this week (Radio 4, 8pm, on Thursday 15th March and again on 22nd and online).

David Normington

Blog for 19 Mar 2007

How I keep in touch with HO people

Thanks to those who answered the poll about the usefulness of the blog. I can assure you that at least once a week (and sometimes more often) I go through the comments on the blog. It is unrealistic to expect me to answer them individually. But, where there are particular hot topics, I try to comment them or to get someone else to do so.

It is only one of the ways I try to keep in touch with what people think. Believe it or not (!) I do sometimes just get up from me desk and go and talk to colleagues. I also try regularly to spend 30 to 45 minutes with teams hearing about their work. I spent a whole day doing that in Sheffield ([see my video diary of the day](#)). I go to meetings big and small – like last Wednesday's Network AGM where I, Lin Homer and John Marsh took questions from the floor for about 45 minutes. In other words there are lots of ways to give and receive views. We need to use them all.

David Normington

Blog for 21 Mar 2007

Our man in Mansfield

I had a good visit to Mansfield in North Nottinghamshire last Friday to look at some of the work of our Respect team in tackling anti-social behaviour. I saw for myself how an estate had been reclaimed from the "neighbours from hell", largely through the determination of the local community and the police and the courage of neighbours, who were prepared to give evidence against them. Then I met some of the local bar owners in the town centre who were working together to tackle anti-social behaviour at chucking out time on Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights. Really impressive. And a good example of how the Home Office's work is bringing real benefits in local communities.

David Normington

Blog for 29 Mar 2007

Your patience would be appreciated . . .

I thought I ought to make a quick response to some of the early comments and make a plea for people to understand some of the constraints on communications. In a 24 hour media world it is very difficult to ensure that our staff hear before it appears on the media. As I said in my global at 9 o'clock this morning, I was not able to tell people what the position is until after Cabinet this morning when the Prime Minister was making the formal announcement. The fact is that I have to follow the rules. I am as frustrated as everyone else that there was briefing of the media last night (though not I believe from the Home Office) before the time when we were allowed to tell our staff.

But there have now been two global messages, some Q&A briefing and a lot of face to face briefing which continues, particularly for those staff affected. I understand why people think this is not good enough. But in the real world it is probably the best we can do.

David Normington

Blog for 3 Apr 2007

Any questions?

I know there are lots of questions about the effects of last week's changes. The Q&A brief we published last Friday gives the first answers to the questions. But

we will keep them updated on [the dedicated restructuring page on Horizon](#).

I have appreciated the positive comments particularly in the last few days, including those who have recognised how frustrating it is for me (as well as everyone else) to hear of big changes first in the media.

Thank you also to "Green, Liverpool" for trying to change the subject. The Home Office is trying to do it's bit on climate change. Its new building in Sheffield will be one of the most energy efficient in the country. And on cigarettes, Westminster Council recently praised the Home Office and its staff for being one of the few Departments that provided (and used!) ashtrays for staff smoking outside.

David Normington

Blog for 11 Apr 2007

What's the good news?

I am off on holiday at the moment, but wanted to leave this thought. How can we turn the changes announced a couple of weeks ago into a positive for the Home Office? How can we enter the Spring with a new bounce in our step? I know there will be cynics and those who will say "impossible" but what about the rest of you?

David Normington

Blog for 14 May 2007

Back on the road with David

Thanks to John Marsh for hosting the blog and for Dusty and Joe Dugdale joining in. Our HR colleagues take a lot of stick, don't they? And it was good to have them answering your points and criticisms so openly. Thank you.

I went to Liverpool last week and spent a morning at HOPPS' new building in central Liverpool. It was a relief to me to see that we had at last been able to house our colleagues there in decent accommodation (after all this time). But as important, I was impressed with the commitment to improving their service and processes – and with the really serious improvements in performance that they were achieving. Well done.

I also met a group of staff from the Adelphi Service Centre who told me of their frustration at the moved of Shared Services to South Wales, at the way they had been told and at what they saw as the continued lack of willingness of management to listen and involve them. I promised to follow up their concerns. I appreciated the constructive discussion, but I was left in no doubt that they believed we were not living up to our values.

Finally, I note the comments about John Reid's impending departure. I was forewarned but he certainly took me by surprise when he told me the news. It is my and my senior colleagues' job now – as the civil service leadership of the Department – to land the Home Office safely on the other side of transition. By that I mean we need to greet a new Home Secretary with confidence that we are on the right track, that we have clear ideas about the next key steps in the development of policies and services and that we are ready to respond positively and swiftly to his or her ideas and wishes. More of this anon. But since this will be my sixth Secretary of State in six years (this month) as Permanent Secretary, I reckon I know quite a lot about transitions.

David Normington

There is [a code of conduct](#) for David's blog, please take the time to read this before submitting your comments.

Blog for 4 Jun 2007

Does length matter?

There have been a lot of comments on the blog about recognising long service. I have to confess that I am in two minds about this. I do want to improve the way we recognise and value people but I am not sure about singling out long service above everything else. What about the people who haven't been here for 25 years and how are we going to recognise and thank them? So we are taking a serious and urgent look at recognition, reward and thanks. I haven't ruled out recognition for long service, but I would appreciate other ideas as well. I would welcome a lively debate.

David Normington